

Conducting In-Depth Assessments

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Assessment often is the first step in helping TANF recipients living with a disability find and maintain employment. While some TANF recipients living with a disability enter TANF fully aware of their disability, many do not. There are multiple strategies that TANF agencies can employ to identify recipients whose program participation or employment difficulties may be influenced by the presence of a disability or to develop an appropriate employment plan once a disability is identified. In this practice brief, drawing on the experiences of six different TANF initiatives targeted to recipients living with a disability, we describe five different approaches to assessment: disability screening, psychosocial assessments, clinical and psychological assessments, functional needs assessments and vocational assessments.

INTRODUCTION

The transformation of the nation's cash assistance system into a work-oriented system that includes work requirements, sanctions for noncompliance, and time limits has increased the importance of quickly identifying the personal, family, and logistic challenges that may interfere with Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) recipients' abilities to find and maintain competitive employment. To help identify potential barriers, many welfare offices require that TANF applicants and recipients complete an up-front self-assessment where they can identify any disabilities they might have or any other issues that might create barriers to employment. These assessments commonly ask recipients to provide information on their employment history, level of education, participation in education and training programs, physical health problems, mental health issues, substance abuse issues, current or previous domestic violence, learning difficulties, and involvement with the criminal justice system.

Upfront client self-reports serve an important purpose for TANF agencies as they provide TANF applicants an opportunity to disclose issues that might reduce their chances of finding and/or sustaining employment and TANF agencies an opportunity to identify recipients in need of specialized services quickly. However, they only go so far in identifying TANF recipients living with a disability. While recipients may disclose health issues, program staff report they do not disclose learning problems, mental illness, or substance abuse issues as easily and sometimes do not even acknowledge them to themselves. They also report that it is not uncommon for TANF recipients who have endured many challenging situations to minimize their struggles. As a result, disabilities that affect recipients' ability to work often go undiagnosed and untreated for long periods of time. Thus, other approaches are needed to uncover disabilities that are hidden or not revealed through the routine self-reports. In this practice brief, we profile innovative state or local TANF initiatives

that were designed to dig deeper to identify recipients living with a disability that impacts their ability to find or maintain employment and/or to understand the extent of their disability to provide better services to them. These in-depth and comprehensive assessment efforts are all part of larger efforts to provide individualized and specialized services and/or create work opportunities for TANF recipients living with a disability. The sites profiled were selected after a comprehensive effort to identify special employment initiatives for TANF recipients living with a disability.

ABOUT THIS SERIES

This is one of four practice briefs examining strategies TANF agencies may consider implementing to help TANF recipients living with a disability to realize their full employment potential. Other briefs in the series include, *Creating TANF and Vocational Rehabilitation Agency Partnerships*, *Creating Work Opportunities*, and *Providing Specialized Personal and Work-Based Support*. These briefs draw on case studies of nine programs that have been implemented by state or county welfare agencies to provide specialized services to TANF recipients living with a disability who have not succeeded in traditional job search programs. None of these programs has been rigorously evaluated, thus, their effectiveness remains unknown. Still, they provide important information on program design and implementation that program administrators can use to craft strategies that take into account their program goals and the unique features of their TANF caseload. These briefs were completed by Mathematica Policy Research, Inc. under contract to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), Administration for Children and Families.

